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Authority NND939550
By NARA Date 1/19/06

SECRET

THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.



SENSITIVE

EYES ONLY

23 August 1963

5/2

MEMORANDUM FOR THE HONORABLE DEAN RUSK
SECRETARY OF STATE

SUBJECT: Attached Cable from General Harkins

At the direction of the President, I have queried General Harkins as to his evaluation of the present relationship between the Diem government and the Armed Forces of South Vietnam. Specifically, I inquired whether the declaration of martial law indicated that Diem had confidence in his armed forces or that he had become a hostage to them. Also what was General Harkins' estimate of the effect of recent events on our common programs in Vietnam?

Attached herewith is his reply. The informal tone results from the fact that this is a private exchange between two old friends.

Maxwell D. Taylor
MAXWELL D. TAYLOR
Chairman
Joint Chiefs of Staff

1 Incl
as stated

13. x 41173

PL-27-VT-ET-5

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DTG: 220330Z August 1963

FROM: HARKINS, SAIGON
TO: TAYLOR, WASHINGTON, D.C.
INFO: FELT, HAWAII

SECRET NOFORN MAC 1495 EYES ONLY

EYES ONLY FOR GEN. TAYLOR AND EXCLUSIVE FOR ADM. FELT

Reference your JCS 3284

1. It's a bit premature to crystal ball the hidden machinations and internal machinations of this mixed-up country. However, my first thought is that Diem still has confidence in the armed forces otherwise he would not have put them in charge at such a critical time, the Buddhist situation such as it was and he, himself, rapidly losing station in the eyes of the world, as indicated by press reports. As you know, Gen Don, now acting chief of the JGS in the absence of Ty, has been one of the most vociferous in saying Diem and the Nhu's must go before this country can make any headway. He has made these remarks so outward I feel certain the President is cognizant of how Don feels.

2. Last week I told Diem someone must be appointed in Ty's place so that we can get on with the war. Don was appointed Tuesday and at midnight martial law was declared. My first thought was that he really was a fast worker. However, when he called me early Tuesday morning, he told me the President wanted me to know that he, the President, has declared martial law in order to secure the rear areas.

R-11341

TO: 220920Z August 1963

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3. Gen Dinh (III Corps) another coup slinger, has been named Commander of the Saigon-Cholon area during the emergency. Big Minh, advisor to the President, remains in place.

4. So you see the stage is set for an easy military take-over.

5. However, in the midst of everything yesterday, Gen Don had the courtesy to come over and explain the reasons for the "State of Siege."

6. He again assured me the President himself had made the declaration.

He did this because the Buddhist situation was getting out of hand. It had gone from religious controversy to political incitation of rebellion.

7. I asked Don how long he thought martial law would stay in effect and he replied if things remained quiet maybe only a short time because he remarked, "you know how the President does not want the military to be in control." I asked if it would remain in effect until after the elections on the 31st. He assured me it would not. Otherwise the elections could not be considered free elections (as if they ever were).

8. Don said he wanted my assistance in carrying the war against the VC to a successful conclusion. I said I was at his beck and call. He stated the war would continue, the state of martial law should not affect operations as he was only using the reserve forces to make a show of military force in the cities. We'll have to wait and see on this - so far only one paratroop and one marine battalion, plus some MP's have been used in Saigon. In Hue, they moved two BNS from the training center to keep order in the city. However, other battalions in the vicinity are on the alert, Armored vehicles have been seen in both cities.

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9. All corps senior advisors have reported that the operations against the VC were continuing apace in their areas. Again, it's a bit early to say they'll continue in such magnitudes as the VC were not prepared and have not yet reacted to the military take-over. As to the effect of the new relationship to our common programs - I hope there will be no change if I can believe Don in saying the war will continue against the VC.

10. As you know, our programs are completed. We have accomplished our part of everything we set out to do after your visit in the fall of '61 - all except ending the war, and that is not far off if things continue at present pace.

11. The I Corps is quiescent. In the II Corps, Gen Khanh said yesterday things were going so well he was looking for a place of more action. Well, I agree it's the best corps of all, but there is a bit left to be done - not much, however.

12. The III Corps has its biggest headaches in the provinces around Saigon, and in the past two weeks I have succeeded in moving two additional regiments into the area from the I and II Corps.

13. The IV Corps is where the war is being fought. 70 per cent of the weekly incidents are there. Today I'm asking Thuan to move the 9th Div intact from II Corps to the Delta area to clean up Long An, Dinh Thuong, Kien Hoa and Vinh Binh provinces. The rest of the Delta will be slow but easy if we can get these provinces settled. They're coming along - but it's difficult terrain, particularly in the rainy season. They have more VC than most of the provinces, and the people are harder to convince.

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They just don't like the government - just want to be left alone with their rice and fish. //

14. So as far as our programs are concerned, at least the military, they are paying off, and all that is needed to end the conflict is the will and determination of the Vietnamese to win. This I believe is evidenced by the fact that they have averaged about two or three thousand operations a week since July, and last week they had over 4,000. This counts everything from patrols and ambushes to the larger type. However, in my opinion, I think we will see a drop in the number of operations against the VC until things settle down a bit.

15. I'm afraid I have rambled in answering your questions; however, as it looks from here at this time the fact that Diem placed the military in command indicates he still has confidence in them. Though Don is nominally in command, it appears that the usual multiple channels still exist and run to the palace. I'm not able to answer what's going on between them. I'll keep my ear to the ground and try to determine. It could be they (the military) through threats or persuasion told him he'd better do something or else. I can not prove this with what information I have at this time, nor can I state flatly he's not a hostage of the military as I have not seen him since the announcement of martial law.

16. The effect on the programs should be nil if they continue carrying the war to the enemy.

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47. In closing, the present situation might be a blessing in disguise.

There exists for all practical purposes a military take-over with minimum violence. A few bones were bruised as the police and military took over the main Pagodas yesterday. Not that I'm for the military taking over - no indeed - but the state of affairs as they were, it was becoming evident things were getting out of control, and some measure of authority had to be established. That it was done without firing a shot and thru the nominal chain of command precluded a lot of bloodshed which would have spilled if the rival factions tried to take over.

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